
The psychology of the online offender – challenge and opportunities

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About me

Understanding how and why technology is utilised for 'good' and 'bad' behaviours has been the central component to my professional experience to date. With a background in sociology and social policy, I studied psychology as a postgraduate before teaching in primary education in the Middle East using 1-to-1 iPad technology. From there, I went on to specialise in forensic psychology (MSc) and focus on the case formulation of online sexual offending. I was a research assistant and associate lecturer within the Online-Protect research cluster at the University of Lincoln before taking up my current PhD position.

ACM Classification Keywords

J.4 Social and behavioural sciences

Personal experience with online communities

Both my personal and professional identity communicated via my Twitter (@DarraghMcCashin) has afforded me insights into online communities. For example, in acquiring research participants for sensitive topics via Twitter (such as attitudinal research on contact versus online sexual offending), it became clear that both appropriate and inappropriate communities

sought to respond accordingly. Psychologically, I also found it fascinating to observe in my data that there were a number of help-seeking behaviours displayed from what would typically be described as offender populations.

Online offending - my theoretical and empirical interpretation

Focusing on Internet sexual offending and grooming, I strongly believe that the recent advancements in our knowledge of the aetiology of paedophilia and the psychology of grooming provide key opportunities to 'build in' primary prevention models to technology.

Regarding paedophilia (generally defined as the long-standing sexual interest in prepubescent children), recent evidence indicates that this is likely an unchosen attraction with a literal cross-wiring observable in the cabling of the brain [1]. Evidence from countries with non-mandatory reporting systems and anonymous intervention services have clearly demonstrated that there exists many 'non-offending paedophiles' that uphold the paedophilic interest in, but zero intention to offend against, prepubescent children [2]. The internet remains a space where some such groups support each other in living offence-free celibate lives [3], but the internet presents risks to engage in illegal behaviours. The legal, ethical and moral issues that this population present in an increasingly technology-driven society warrants considerable attention by HCI and industry alike.

With respect to grooming, psychology has patterned several dynamics embedded within grooming scenarios where online offending transitions to offline offending [4]. However, a key trend within the literature is that a

high proportion of people with online sexual offences have very low reconviction rates and may be appropriately conceptualised as a new type of low-risk offender [5].

Where are the opportunities?

Given the advancing evidence, I am interested in how HCI can ethically contribute to emerging suggestions from the literature. For example, for the vetted and evidence-based online communities for 'non-offending paedophiles', how could HCI build-in a safe yet accountable environment for such communities?

The issue of grooming is one where considerable opportunity exists. The emergence of online vigilantism has ironically demonstrated the feasibility of online masquerading (with the view to entrapping the would-be offender). Whilst law enforcement performs similarly on an operation-by-operation basis, there is scope to consider how HCI systems can recognise grooming variables and intervene. Also, cybercrime professionals have suggested that police forces can vet and train citizens to become 'digital detectives' wherein they masquerade online with the view to detecting potential offenders. Consequently, no crime occurs, the individual is detected and intervention takes place, and the need for vigilantism reduces [6].

Policy considerations

To explore the feasibility and practicality of the above opportunities, there needs to be multi-agency cooperation. Many regions are exploring future uses of smartphones and children, in addition to enhanced regulation of the Internet to counteract the apparently exponential rise of online offending. Therefore, current policies and platforms within the technological industry

would greatly benefit from incorporating the latest psychological evidence base. This should follow the principle of in-built prevention at the primary level.

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